

Reflections

Wednesday-Sunday, September 9-13, 2020

This edition of Reflections is a bit o' this and a bit o' that. There are articles, quotes and quips that have come my way.

The Virus is a Marathon

~NYTimes

Last week's newsletter comparing the U.S. coronavirus death toll to the global average helped spark a continuing debate: What's the fairest expectation of how bad the pandemic *should* have been in this country?

Your answer to that question guides your judgment of the Trump administration's response. Ross Douthat of The Times has argued that it was merely mediocre, while Vox's German Lopez and The Atlantic's David Frum consider it to have been far less effective than other countries' responses.

One of the people who's weighed in — via email — is Donald McNeil. By now, you may know him as the Times science reporter who has frequently appeared on "The Daily" podcast to talk about the coronavirus.

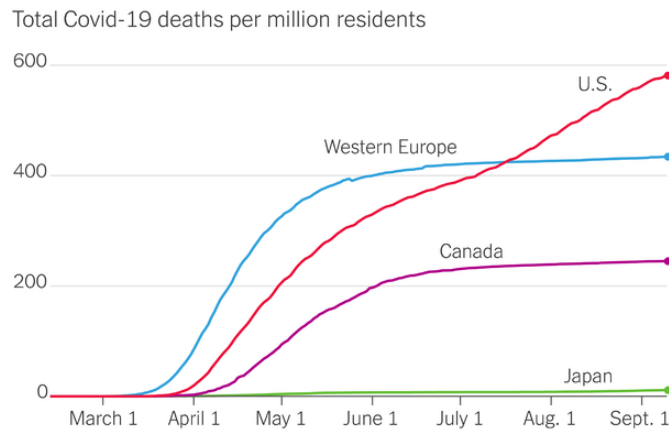
Donald makes a fascinating point: Don't look only at snapshots, like a country's per capita death toll. "It's not fair to pick one point in time and say, 'How are we doing?'" he writes. "You can only judge how well countries are doing when you add in the time factor" — that is, when the virus first exploded in a given place and what has happened since.

The pandemic, he adds, is like a marathon with staggered start times.

The virus began spreading widely in Europe earlier than in North America. Much of Europe failed to contain it at first and suffered terrible death tolls. The per capita toll in a few countries, like Britain, Italy and Spain, remains somewhat higher than in the U.S. But those countries managed to get the virus under control by the late spring. Their caseloads plummeted.

In the U.S., the virus erupted later — yet caseloads never plummeted. Almost every day for the past six months, at least 20,000 Americans have been diagnosed with the virus. "Europe learned the hard lesson and applied remedies," as Donald says. "We did not, even though we had more warning."

This chart makes the point:



Western Europe comprises 19 countries, from Germany and Scandinavia in the east to Ireland and Portugal in the west.

By The New York Times | Sources: Johns Hopkins University and World Bank

The population-adjusted death toll in the U.S. surpassed Western Europe's two months ago. The U.S. toll is far above those of France, Germany, Canada, Japan, Australia and many other countries — and is on pace to overtake Italy's in the next few days and Britain's and Spain's not long after that.

Donald does add one important caveat. "We won't really be able to judge until it's over," he says. Cases have recently begun rising again in Spain and some other parts of Europe, raising the possibility that Europe is on the verge of a new surge of deaths. In the U.S., Labor Day gatherings and the reopening of some schools may cause new outbreaks — or may not.

For now, the simplest summary seems to be this: Adjusting for time, there is no large, rich country that has suffered as much as the U.S.

Discovery

From Seth Godin. As we move forward with our online division. Let's take his exhortation to heart.

"Apple has carefully guarded the podcast directory, persuading podcasters that 'winning' here is the shortcut to building a popular podcast. But they're terrible at introducing podcasts to new listeners, terrible at developing a point of view that enables the industry to thrive or even grow.

Compare this to Netflix. They're terrific at surfacing content and helping people find things that they end up liking. Netflix, for economic and marketing reasons, has limited the number of 'shows' they have to promote, but within their set, they continue to delight. Compare this to YouTube—if you follow the 'recommended' path for just a handful or two of clicks, you'll end up with something banal or violent.

Google built its entire business on the mythology of discovery, persuading millions of entrepreneurs and creators that somehow, SEO would help them get found, at the very same time they've dramatically decreased organic search results to maximize revenue.

Bookstores were pretty good at helping people discover new books, and in some situations, Amazon's even better. Often, though, particularly on the Kindle and with Audible, Amazon does little indeed to help people find serendipity as they think about what to engage with next. (And putting recommendations up for sale to the publishers is shortsighted and greedy, imho).

In music, Roon's 'radio' feature does a startlingly good job of introducing me to songs I thought I already loved, even though I'm hearing them for the first time.

Given how much our culture depends on finding out what's new, it's surprising that few have figured out how to be smart about it. If you're a creator, the truth remains what the truth has been ever since Yahoo tried to sort the web by hand: the best way to make a hit is to build something for the smallest viable audience and make it so good that people tell their peers."

(Scott: imho = in my humble opinion)

Bagpipe Flashmob: Inverness, Scotland

~Scooter McMoneagle

Plenty of kilts, pipes and smiles.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fWd8iH0uBSg>

"Because" vs. "and"

~Seth Godin

The way you're feeling... is it *because* of something that's going on around you? Or are you simply feeling something *and* there's a situation?

One way to determine the difference:

Has this situation ever happened without you (or anyone, for that matter) feeling the way you're feeling?

[to pick an outdated example, one that someday we might experience again]:

"I'm feeling stressed and overwhelmed because there are ten people waiting for a table at the restaurant and we're falling behind."

Except: plenty of people who run restaurants have experienced ten people waiting for a table without feeling stressed and overwhelmed.

It's not the line that's causing the stress. It's your interpretation of the line.

You're overwhelmed *and* there's a line.

Quote of the Week

Real-Leaders.com

~Brian Tracy

"Leaders think and talk about the solutions. Followers think and talk about the problems."

"Taking" Lessons

~Seth Godin

What an accurate and horrible term.

It's hard to imagine that most people would look forward to taking lessons. In the piano or arithmetic or anything else.

You take medicine. You take your punishment. It's unwanted but grudgingly accepted.

The term gives away the intent behind it.

Learning is different. Learning is something we get to do, it's a dance, an embrace, a chance to turn on some lights.

You don't take a workshop. You are part of one.

I look forward to seeing you on Monday.

Scott